

“The Sweet and the Bitter”: Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*



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Amy Amendt-Raduege. *“The Sweet and the Bitter”: Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings*. Kent State University Press, 2018. Paperback, x + 160 pages, \$30.00. ISBN 9781606353059.

AMY Amendt-Raduege’s slim volume takes as its impetus the fact (supported by numerous sources cited by Amendt-Raduege) that those facing the risk or even the imminence of death, such as soldiers in combat zones or the terminally ill, seem to find J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* a text that helps them deal with their impending mortality. Her overt agenda is to argue that the novel “works like an *ars moriendi*—a guide to the art of dying well” (3), thereby filling an important need in this secular age in which such guides have largely fallen by the wayside. Divided into five chapters, the book deals with the good death in chapter one, “The Wages of Heroism”; the bad (though not necessarily irredeemable) death in chapter two, “The Bitter End”; the memorialization of the dead, via both literary and physical markers, in chapter three, “Songs and Stones”; the significance of ghosts and revenants in chapter four, “Haunting the Dead”; and finally with how Tolkien’s overall treatment of death acquires applicability (thereby adopting Tolkien’s preferred term, in place of allegory, when readers attempted to find hidden meaning in his work) for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century reader, in the concluding chapter, “Applicability: ‘Hope without Guarantee.’”

Despite its brevity, the book is well-grounded in Tolkien scholarship and in an understanding of relevant historical and literary antecedents for Tolkien’s treatment of death. Amendt-Raduege uses not only Tolkien’s texts (though she sticks primarily to *The Lord of the Rings*, she often draws in relevant passages from other works) but also the knowledge of history and literary history that clearly informs Tolkien’s writing. Though some readers will no doubt already have some idea of the debts Tolkien owes to Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, Norse, medieval English, and other literary/cultural sources and inspirations, Amendt-Raduege adds to our understanding of the importance of these antecedents thanks to her tight focus on how Tolkien’s

representations of death and the trappings of death are often rooted in such materials.

While different readers might find different interventions most useful, for me the most insightful chapters were three and four, which document and analyze Tolkien's treatment of burial customs across the different cultures of Middle-earth, and how, especially, the restless dead—encountered in the Barrow Downs, the Paths of the Dead (significantly, themselves *beneath* the mountain Dwimorberg, a Tolkienian neologism that Amendt-Raduege argues persuasively has etymological links with “barrow”), and the Dead Marsh. Chapters one and two cover four significant “good” deaths—those of Théoden, Gandalf (acknowledging that her challenge here is significant, since wizards rarely are accorded noble ends—and in any event, Gandalf, unlike the others, is resurrected), Aragorn and, problematically, Boromir, whose “good” death is tainted by the corruption that precedes it—and that precipitates the breaking of the Fellowship—and, in parallel, four significant “bad” deaths—those of Denethor, Gollum, Saruman, and Gríma Wormtongue. While the structure is not schematic, Amendt-Raduege not only reminds us of the obvious pairings—Théoden/Denethor, Gandalf/Saruman—but also offers up intriguing intimations of ways to see the deaths of Gollum and Gríma in relation to the good deaths, as well. Notably, she makes a tempting, if not entirely convincing, case for Gollum as redeemable. Chapters three and four, however, do more to explore new (or at any rate less-frequently-travelled) territory.

Amendt-Raduege's exploration of the death and burial customs of the Elves, Dwarfs, and humans (which vary from culture to culture) offers useful insights into the sorts of cultures Tolkien imagines them as being, with their conceptions of and relationships to death revealing (or at least suggesting) significant aspects of their self-conceptions and preoccupations. Especially illuminating is her consideration of the contrast between Rohan and Gondor in this regard. Though she reiterates at least once too often that the way death is hidden away and suppressed in Gondor can be tied back to the Númenorean ancestry of the people of Gondor (indeed, despite its brevity this book would have benefitted from some tightening and closer editing), her exploration of Middle-earth's human cultures and of what death means to them is, for me, the most useful aspect of the book. Aragorn excepted, it would seem, the people of the West have forgotten the *ars moriendi*, whereas the Rohirrim have not.

Amendt-Raduege's focus on *The Lord of the Rings* as *ars moriendi* does lead her (perhaps unsurprisingly) into ideologically-grounded assumptions about death and

its meaning. Insofar as Tolkien was a Catholic, and despite leaving out almost entirely (Amendt-Raduege notes one significant exception, Tolkien's invocation of the idea of heathenism) anything smacking of explicit or even implicit Christian allegory in the text, his own beliefs clearly informed much of the novel, and one can easily find Christian "applicability" (if not allegory) in the text—most overtly, of course, in Gandalf's death and resurrection. Tolkien's underlying point, Amendt-Raduege argues, is that one can face death best only when one faces it with hope, without guarantee, that death is not the end. Tolkien may have believed this (and indeed, believing it for the soldiers and terminally ill who find comfort in the book may be useful for them), but at times the book seems to cross the line between analyzing Tolkien's ideology and (implicitly, at least) endorsing it. Her assertion, for instance, that "[d]eath is only meaningful if life is sacred" (111-12) seems to represent a given for this text, rather than simply a given for Tolkien's text. I am inclined to think her argument might have been stronger, or at any rate less tendentious, if it interrogated rather than simply accepting such a view. Nevertheless, this book is clearly-written (if under-edited), accessible, and insightful. It is probably of more value to the student than the scholar of Tolkien, but scholars will find much of use here, as well.